Assisted Recolonization of Arctic grayling into Rock Creek, in the Upper Big Hole River Basin

Environmental Assessment Decision Notice

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Region Three, Bozeman
May 17, 2010

Proposed Action

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposes to facilitate recolonization of Arctic grayling into Rock Creek in the Upper Big Hole River Basin. Remote Site Incubators (RSIs) will be used to hatch Arctic grayling eggs from the Big Hole River conservation broodstock directly into Rock Creek. Rock Creek flows into the Big Hole River approximately 3 miles south of the town of Wisdom in Beaverhead County. The recolonization reach may include up to 6.5 miles of stream, from the mouth upstream, depending on logistics and access through private land.

Montana Environmental Policy Act

FWP is required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) to assess significant potential impacts of a proposed action to the human and physical environment. In compliance with MEPA, an Environmental Assessment (EA) was completed for the proposed project by FWP and released for public comment on April 9, 2010.

Public comments on the proposed action were taken for 30 days (through May 10, 2010). The EA was mailed to 58 individuals and groups, and legal notices were printed in the *Montana Standard* (Butte, MT) and the *Dillon Tribune*. The EA was also posted on the FWP webpage: http://fwp.mt.gov//publicnotices/

Summary of Public Comment

Four public comments were received during the 30-day review period. The comments and responses to specific comment elements are as follows:

Comment 1: Michael Gibson – Outreach Director, Montana Trout Unlimited:

Reads as follows:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Environmental Assessment for Assisted Recolonization of Arctic grayling into Rock Creek in the Upper Big Hole Basin. Montana TU represents 3,500 conservation-minded anglers statewide. Our members are keenly aware of the plight of fluvial Arctic grayling in the Upper Missouri River drainage. Over the past two decades, Montana TU and its local chapters have supported many projects that improve degraded

habitat, restore watershed connectivity and improve water quality and quantity in the basin. We support any and all efforts by state and federal agencies to further the goal of maintaining sustainable wild populations of fluvial arctic grayling in the Upper Missouri River Basin.

Montana TU supports the Proposed Action (Alternative C) in the Environmental Assessment. It is a well thought out approach to imprinting grayling populations to Rock Creek. As stated in the EA, this population would bolster the entire Big Hole Arctic grayling population and increase genetic diversity of Arctic grayling basin wide.

This project is similar to successful efforts in the Ruby River using remote site incubation (RSIs). If Rock Creek recolonization efforts are also successful, the use of remote site incubation could be replicated elsewhere to help struggling Arctic grayling populations.

Michael Gibson – Outreach Director
Montana Trout Unlimited:
P.O. Box 7186
Missoula, MT 59807

FWP Response: FWP concurs and appreciates the support Montana TU has provided for Arctic grayling conservation efforts for many years. FWP plans to closely monitor RSIs and evaluate the success of this method and the feasibility of applying this method in other areas where habitat conditions are appropriate.

Comment 2: Curtis R. Kruer

Reads as follows:

FWP: "The reasons for the decline of Arctic grayling include: habitat degradation, overexploitation, and impacts from non-native species. A variety of impacts have caused Arctic grayling habitat to degrade including stream dewatering, channel modifications, over-grazing, riparian vegetation removal, and irrigation infrastructure modifications."

I support the FWP's efforts at assisting the recolonization of grayling into reaches of the Big Hole River and its tribs but even more strongly support interagency efforts to permanently improve habitat and water quality and quantity conditions in the upper Big Hole region. Historical problems are succinctly noted in the EA and cited above. Efforts to recolonize these areas will likely fail in the absence of improved habitat so keep up the good work addressing and facilitating restoration and enhancement of on the ground conditions.

Thanks for the opportunity to provide these comments.

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FWP Response: FWP concurs and believes that without addressing the limiting habitat factors and connectivity between habitats for Arctic grayling these efforts will fail. FWP believes that working with landowners to develop restoration and enhancement projects is crucial to the future of the Arctic grayling Big Hole River existence.

Comment 3: Pat Munday, PhD

Reads as follows:

Regarding the EA for "**Recolonization of Arctic grayling in Rock Creek**:"

- In the past few years since the restoration project was completed, Rock Creek has sometimes been totally dewatered in the summer. What is the minimum flow (e.g. cfs for lower wetted perimeter) that is to be maintained for this re-introduction project.
- What assurances are there from irrigators (e.g. in stream flow leasing or other agreement) to insure that minimum flow targets will be met?
- Without assurance of minimum flow, this project will be a waste of FWP time, money, and other resources.

Thank you,

Pat Munday, PhD
Professor of Science & Technology Studies
Montana Tech
Butte MT 59701

FWP Response: FWP agrees that maintaining a minimum instream flow is important to the success of this project. FWP believes that enhancing the instream habitat, connectivity, and instream flows were necessary prior to implementing this project. All of the private property owners on which this project will occur are enrolled in the Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances for Fluvial Arctic Grayling in the Upper Big Hole River Program (CCAA). The CCAA requires that each enrolled landowner develop and implement a Site-Specific Conservation Plan (SSP) for their property. As part of the SSP the landowner is required to develop a Flow Conservation Plan. This plan is developed by interagency team including FWP biologists, Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) hydrologist, and the landowners. The CCAA conservation strategy is to provide flows that promote ecosystem function by facilitating adequate seasonal high-flows events, maintaining baseflow conditions and eliminating human –caused dewatering events. On Rock Creek, the goal for base flow

conditions is to provide a minimum flow that will maintain grayling habitat, provide a healthy thermal regime, allow for suitable forage conditions and maintain connectivity to the mainstem Big Hole River. One of the landowners in which this project occurs has completed their SSP and is required to implement a flow conservation plan when specific low flow triggers are reached. FWP and DNRC are currently working with all the landowners with the right to divert water from Rock Creek to implement the conservation actions that will provide instream flows in Rock Creek necessary to implement this project and are suitable to Arctic grayling.

Comment 4. Kevin Brown Executive Director Big Hole watershed Committee

Reads as follows:

Assisted Recolonization of Arctic grayling into Rock Creek

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the above mentioned FWP project. The Big Hole Watershed Committee (BHWC) has long been involved in recovery efforts of fluvial Arctic grayling in the Big Hole River. We are pleased that FWP has decided to move forward with this project.

The BHWC fully supports the recolonization project for Rock Creek. We encourage FWP to continue with grayling recovery efforts through habitat enhancement and recolonization.

Sincerely,
Kevin Brown
Executive Director

FWP Response: FWP appreciates all the efforts of the Big Hole Watershed Committee since its inception in 1994. Collaborative partnerships are key to the success of on-going conservation efforts and future Arctic grayling habitat enhancement efforts.

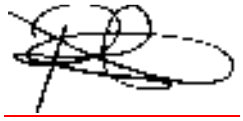
Final Environmental Assessment

There are no modifications necessary to the Draft Environmental Assessment based on public comment. The Draft Environmental Assessment, together with this Decision Notice, will serve as the final document for this proposal.

Decision

Based on the Environmental Assessment, public comment, and the need to preserve fluvial Arctic grayling and its habitat in the upper Big Hole River watershed, it is my decision to proceed with the effort to Assist Recolonization of Arctic grayling into Rock Creek.

I find there to be no significant impacts on the human and physical environments associated with this project. Therefore, I conclude that the Environmental Assessment is the appropriate level of analysis, and that an Environmental Impact Statement is not required.



Patrick J. Flowers
Region Three Supervisor